



FROM SPREADSHEETS TO STRATEGY: THE EVOLUTION OF THE REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CENTER CEDS

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The [Regional Economic Development Center](#) (REDC) has come a long way since it was founded in 1994 as the Rockingham Economic Development Corporation. Designated in 2003 as southern New Hampshire's first Economic Development District (EDD), REDC began with a small team and a big vision that was primarily focused on lending and economic growth. Today it serves 37 municipalities in Rockingham County, as well as the towns of Hudson, Litchfield, Merrimack, Pelham, and the city of Nashua in eastern Hillsborough County.

Back in 2000, REDC completed its very first Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). At the time, the organization had just three staff members, and the CEDS was a simple binder filled with Excel spreadsheets. But even then, the seeds of innovation were being planted. As REDC's work expanded, so did its ambitions.

An Updated Approach to the CEDS

Recognizing the growing importance of the CEDS, in 2009 the team brought on Jennifer Kimball, a former town planner with a background in engineering and planning, to add dedicated part-time support to the strategy. A turning point came in 2013, when former REDC President Laurel Adams attended a NADO conference and discovered that the REDC CEDS was lagging and less modern and user-friendly than its peers. In response, Laurel and Jennifer worked with REDC's Graphic Designer and Design Advisor Laura Harper Lake to transform the CEDS into a visually engaging, spiral-bound publication. This marked the beginning of a more accessible and user-friendly approach.

Fast forward to 2024, which was the start of a new Five-Year CEDS cycle. Jennifer began researching how to make the CEDS even more accessible. REDC launched a survey across its member communities to understand how the CEDS was being used and what people valued most. The key takeaway? Most users accessed it online.

Armed with insights and inspired by NADO's [CEDS Central website](#), REDC reimaged the CEDS both graphically and structurally. The new version features seven priority areas, each with a clear goal, targeted objectives, and a list of partners and resources. It's designed to be a living tool and one that empowers regional organizations to take action and connect with the right people to drive change.



Jennifer Kimball notes that housing and childcare remain the region's most pressing challenges. These themes are front and center in the updated CEDS, which now includes more infographics, a robust economic overview drafted by an expert economist, and a fully digital appendix.

Public engagement also took a leap forward. REDC expanded its public outreach by collaborating with the four overlapping Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) in its geography and the [University of New Hampshire \(UNH\) Cooperative Extension](#) to ensure broad, diverse representation. With assistance from UNH Cooperative Extension, REDC staff will be developing a five-year capacity-building plan to strengthen the committee's role and impact.

From Visioning to Strategy

To deepen community input, REDC partnered with the [Consensus Building Institute](#) (CBI) for a third time to lead a public visioning process. This included three public workshops (one online); one-on-one interviews with stakeholders in education, business, and economic development; and creative engagement tools like vision boards and Mentimeter polls. These sessions helped shape breakout discussions and SWOT analyses.

One key component of the visioning workshops was an exercise in which participants shared a one-sentence vision statement for regional economic development in Southern New Hampshire. These vision statements were consolidated into an overall vision statement for the region:

Our vision for southern New Hampshire is a region rich in opportunity for all ages with a diverse business climate; a commitment to preserving our cultural, natural, and historic resources; a strong local identity; and convenient access to major thoroughfares and cities. Achieving this future will necessitate collaboration among individuals, businesses, communities, and the state to foster a diverse housing stock, affordable childcare, a skilled workforce, robust and resilient utilities and infrastructure, a business-friendly environment, and strong, welcoming communities.



Priority areas and their associated goals were also identified during this process. They are:

1. **Housing:** To develop diversified housing options for people of all incomes, ages, and lifestyles.
2. **Childcare:** To increase the availability and affordability of and accessibility to childcare.
3. **Infrastructure and Utilities:** To invest in infrastructure and utility planning and improvements that strengthen the regional economy and increase resiliency to manmade and natural hazards.
4. **Transportation:** To invest in a multi-modal transportation network that takes into consideration commuters, traffic congestion, parking, recreation, and tourism.
5. **Workforce Attraction and Retention:** To cultivate, support, and expand economic development programs that create jobs and attract and retain a workforce to meet the needs of existing, new, and evolving industries.
6. **Environment and Natural Resources:** To invest in the conservation and management of natural spaces, while creating connections to local economies, improving access for residents and visitors, and building economic resilience to disasters and severe weather.
7. **Community Vibrancy:** To strengthen community vibrancy by supporting local businesses, providing diverse housing options, enhancing public spaces, and promoting community and civic engagement.

In the CEDS, each of these priority areas was outlined by the challenge, vision, strategies and potential solutions.



Childcare and Community Vibrancy

Childcare, a long-standing concern for the REDC region, continues to be a focal point. Since 2020, REDC has highlighted it in CEDS updates, funded facilities, and showcased multimedia interviews on [its website](#). Strafford RPC (a neighboring regional organization) has a comprehensive childcare evaluation, [Expanding Childcare Access in Strafford County, New Hampshire](#), that has become a model for the broader REDC region. To develop this resource, it partnered with NYU Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service's Capstone team to assess regional childcare needs, aiming to support economic development by identifying barriers and opportunities for expanding access.

Another emerging theme in the latest CEDS is community vibrancy, which includes "supporting local businesses, providing diverse housing options, enhancing public spaces,

and promoting community and civic engagement." Some of the strategies around community vibrancy include expanding access to community-based programs and services including civic infrastructure, creating more housing options for older populations to age in place, protecting cultural and natural amenities, and prioritizing walking and community connections through active transportation opportunities.

Tailoring Alternative Lending Programs

Alternative lending makes up a significant portion of REDC's activities. It works in partnership with local lenders, state and federal agencies, or independently to provide advising, funding, and support to help new and existing small businesses secure the funding needed to complete projects leading to job creation and retention. REDC has assisted several large and small companies' expansion efforts using [Community Development Block Grant \(CDBG\)](#) financing as well as the [USDA Rural Development's Business Enterprise Grant \(RBEG\)](#). These two federal programs have been the cornerstone financing tools for the capitalization of the RLF.

Currently, REDC offers lending to communities in southern New Hampshire and also offers micro-loans and technical assistance statewide. Its loan programs include SBA Microloan Program, USDA intermediary Relending program, EDA Revolving Loan Program, CDFI Loan Program, NH Business Finance Authority, and REDC Revolving Loan Fund.



The CEDS has also helped spark new lending initiatives, like its [Building Roots Home Fund](#) and [New Americans Loan Fund](#). The [2020 CEDS](#) was REDC's first that contained a Housing chapter; while REDC long recognized housing as a barrier to economic development, the worsening housing crisis across the region and state pushed housing affordability and



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availability to the top of the 2020 CEDS goals. The Building Roots Home Fund is a program to support the development of new rental properties with a minimum of five units in New Hampshire that focuses on workforce housing for low- to moderate-income people. The Fund provides loans from \$500,000 to \$3,000,000 to developers who are developing projects with at least 20% of the units available to people earning 80% of the Area Median Income (AMI) or less. Preference is given to projects with a higher percentage of affordable units.

Started in May 2017, the New Americans Loan Fund was first mentioned in the [2017 CEDS Update](#) as a way of helping “NH’s only growing population segment.” The [2018 CEDS Update](#) was the first with a new section on new Americans. The resulting New Americans Loan Fund is meant to encourage business development and job creation for new Americans in New Hampshire. REDC works independently or in partnership with local lenders to help borrowers secure the micro-funding needed to start or grow their small businesses, in microloans ranging from \$5,000 to \$50,000, generally used for working capital to grow the business or to purchase equipment or inventory.

Measurement and Looking Ahead

As a lender, REDC’s impact is measured through metrics it can influence directly: job creation, private investment, and lending outcomes. While it cannot build roads or change zoning laws, REDC excels at identifying opportunities, connecting people, sharing ideas, and catalyzing regional progress. REDC evaluates how well the organization aligns with CEDS goals in its semi-annual reports, which also offer an opportunity to reflect on how many priority projects REDC has supported.

REDC created its new CEDS through thoughtful collaboration and diverse stakeholder engagement. According to Jennifer Kimball, “REDC’s new five-year CEDS is the result of regional collaboration and a lot of listening to our stakeholders. We made a real effort to bring in voices from every part of our region, so the priorities and goals reflect the communities and businesses we serve. We also overhauled the format to make it more user-friendly: cleaner, easier to navigate, and more accessible to everyone, from local officials to community members.” REDC staff intend to carry this momentum forward, ensuring that future CEDS are dynamic, community-driven strategies that both inform and motivate regional economic development in southern New Hampshire.

Case Study photos courtesy of Regional Economic Development Center (REDC).

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